

'An Inspector Calls' – key information

1. Context: (AO3)

- Priestley set the play in 1912 (just before the sinking of the Titanic) to reveal some of the remaining outdated ideas of **Capitalism** and **class hierarchy** of his post war audience.
- The play was written in 1945 (at the end of WW2) and was a reaction to the changes in society as a result of the wars: class systems had changed and attitudes were becoming more **Socialist**.
- Priestley criticises **Edwardian values**, which allowed **status and wealth** to have power over poverty.
- Priestley warns against the **social inequalities** due to **gender and class**.
- A more **Socialist Britain** was emerging, for example, workers were about to strike for better conditions (after the brutalities of the Industrial Revolution and Victorian working conditions).
- Priestley was a socialist and campaigned for rights for all in society.

2. Themes: (AO1 and AO3)

Theme	Characters	Plot details
Social responsibility	Birling Sheila Gerald Eric Mrs Birling Inspector	Consequences of each Birling/Gerald action Inspector's warning Double twist at end – lesson not learned
Gender	Sheila Mrs Birling Eva	Engagement ring Sheila's change of mind Eva's circumstances with Gerald, Eric and Mrs Birling
Age	Sheila – Mrs. Birling Eric – Mr Birling Gerald	Sheila and Eric's reactions to Eva's death more sympathetic Mr and Mrs Birling and Gerald don't seem to have learned anything at end – more concerned with public appearances
Power	Mr Birling Mrs Birling Inspector	Mr Birling wields his power over his family – speeches at beginning, instructing Inspector Mrs. Birling tells children what to do (this is overturned at end when Eric and Sheila voice their objections) Inspector – maintains power over all the Birlings and Gerald (voice, information and structuring their confessions)
Class	Gerald Mr and Mrs Birling	Mr Birling's reference to Gerald's parents at beginning Mrs Birling being her husband's social superior Mr Birling's obsession with knighthood
Poverty and capitalism	Edna Gerald Eric Mrs Birling	Use of money to "buy" Eva – Gerald, Eric Withholding charity – Mrs. B Sheila and Mr Birling both use money and status to damage Eva

3. Key events: (AO1)

- The Birling family are celebrating the engagement of Sheila Birling to Gerald Croft (a higher class businessman)
- An Inspector interrupts Mr Birling's speech about capitalism
- Mr Birling's confession – had Eva sacked for protesting about wages
- Sheila's confession – had Eva sacked from a dress shop as she was jealous of her
- Gerald's confession – "rescued" Eva/Daisy Renton from prostitution and installed her as his lover in a friend's set of rooms. Abandons her for Sheila and a respectable marriage.
- Mrs. Birling's confession – refuses "Mrs. Birling"/Eva social support from her charity – Eva is pregnant and unemployed
- Eric's confession – picked Eva up as a prostitute and raped her. Stole money from his father's business to pay her when she gets pregnant.

- Inspector turns out to be “false” and Mr and Mrs Birling + Gerald celebrate their “escape”
- Phone rings – an Inspector is on the line

4. Literary terms: (AO2)

- Cyclical structure – *The play begins and ends with the Inspector's call (using a **circular structure**), revealing how little progress some of the Birlings have made with their understanding.*
- Morality play – *The use of the **morality play** form highlights the warnings that Priestley gives about the dangers of Capitalism and a lack of social responsibility.*
- Elements of a whodunnit play – who is most to blame?
- Stage directions – *provide information about characterisation and key symbolic set details. The use of the **stage directions** “pink and intimate” turning to “brighter” foreshadows the intense spotlight the Inspector will focus on the Birlings.*
- Drawing room drama – *all set within the confines of the house (a reflection of the privileged class and their entertainment at the expense of others.*
- Dramatic irony – *the audience understands that Mr. Birling is wrong about the Titanic and WW1, but the characters do not. Priestley uses **dramatic irony** in “Unsinkable, absolutely unsinkable” to highlight how incorrect Mr. Birling's myopic views are.*

5. Prepared introduction: learn and adapt to the exam question

Priestley presents [key focus] to reveal the **hypocrisy** and **social injustice** of a society based on class and status. As a **socialist**, he uses a **morality play** to criticise the ways that wealth and social standing could impact on others' happiness and lifestyles. The Birlings' indifference to **social justice** is presented in the **cyclical structure** of the play, from the opening where the family is self-congratulatory of their success to their dismissal of the Inspector as “moonshine” at the end.

Key Vocabulary:

Aristocracy	The highest class in society typically comprising people who hold titles and land.	<i>Priestley presents Gerald as an aristocrat; someone who is out of touch with the working class public.</i>
Biblical Allusion	Reference to or use of language and stories associated with the bible and Christianity.	<i>Priestley uses the allusion to hell in “fire and blood and anguish” to symbolise the suffering caused by the bourgeoisie.</i>
Bourgeoisie	The capitalist class who own the means of production.	<i>The Birlings are representative of the bourgeoisie, who do not support the less fortunate in society.</i>
Capitalism	The system where goods and business are owned by private individuals.	<i>Priestley criticises the capitalist ideas, represented by Mr. Birling's attitude towards his workers.</i>
Chivalry	Courteous behaviour of a man towards a woman.	<i>Gerald is presented as chivalrous in offering to support Daisy, but only wants to use her.</i>
Dehumanisation	The process of denying a person or group of human qualities.	<i>Both Mr and Mrs Birling dehumanise Eva by calling her “cheap labour” and “girls of that sort”.</i>
Didactic	Intended to teach, particularly a moral lesson.	<i>Priestley presents the Inspector as didactic in his approach to the Birlings: they need to be taught how to treat others better.</i>
Enlightened	Someone who has a more rational and modern viewpoint.	<i>Priestley presents Sheila and Eric as having more enlightened views by the end of the play: they accept their mistakes and understand that society has to become more socially responsible.</i>
Eternal Class Struggle	Class struggle, or class warfare or class conflict, is tension between the classes.	<i>The inequalities shown between Eva and Sheila demonstrate the tension between the classes.</i>

Exploitation	The action or fact of treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work.	Eva is represented as being exploited for her labour by Mr. Birling and by her vulnerability by Eric.
Feminist	Someone who promotes women's rights.	Priestley presents Sheila as increasingly feminist in her views when she argues with her father over Eva's sacking.
Fragmented	Broken up.	Priestley gives Eric fragmented speech to reveal the extent of his worries and anxieties.
Generational Division	A difference of opinions between one generation and another regarding beliefs, politics, or values.	Sheila and Sybil's attitude to marriage indicates the generational division and societal changes.
Hierarchy	The social ladder, where some members of society are more privileged than others.	The Birlings are presented as a family who are concerned with maintaining their status in the social hierarchy .
Hubris	Overconfidence that backfires.	Mr Birling is hubristic and arrogant in celebrating his achievements and boasting about the prospect of being given a Knighthood.
Hypocritical	Behaving in a way that suggests someone has higher standards than is the case.	Mrs Birling is represented as a hypocrite : she has a role on a charity committee, but refuses to help Eva.
Misogynist	Someone who hates or is prejudiced towards women.	Gerald is presented as misogynistic in his views towards Daisy: he wants to "save" her, but ends up hurting her further.
Myopia	The quality of being short sighted.	Mr and Mrs Birling are presented as myopic : they do not understand that their actions could have far-reaching consequences.
Objectification	Treating a human as if they are an object for use.	Both Eric and Gerald are presented as objectifying Eva/Daisy: they are only interested in their gain.
Officer Class	Soldiers in WW1 who gave the orders rather than did the actual fighting.	Gerald represents the Officer Class , who were out of date with the general public in World War One.
Pejorative	Expressing disapproval or contempt for something.	Sheila's pejorative dismissal of Mr Birling's argument for sacking Eva reveals her more enlightened views.
Philanthropy	The desire to help and support others in the community.	Mrs Birling is hypocritical in her approach to philanthropy : she does it not to help, but to maintain status.
Repression	The process of trying to forget or hide from difficult or unpleasant thoughts.	Eric is representative of the repressed youth, who cover their emotional hurt with alcohol.
Social Conditioning	The way in which society makes people have certain beliefs and behaviours.	Priestley presents Sheila as socially conditioned at the start of the play: she seems to accept her role as being engaged to Gerald as her fate.
Social Responsibility	The belief that every person has an obligation to look after each other in order to help the wider community.	Priestley warns the audience of the risks of a lack of social responsibility when the Inspector declares that the Birlings will learn their lesson in "fire and blood and anguish".
Socialism	The set of beliefs that states that all people should share equally in a country's money.	Priestley presents the Inspector as a Socialist and interested in creating a fairer world for the underprivileged.
Status quo	The way things currently are and work.	Mr and Mrs Birling are keen to cover up any potential scandal to maintain their status quo in society.

Paired quotations

1. The phrase 'pink and intimate' demonstrates the fragile comfortability of the Birlings bourgeois life.
2. 'Pink and intimate' could also foreshadow the blood of Eva which will come to haunt the Birlings.
3. The 'brighter and harder' light represents the revelation of traumatic truth that the Inspector will bring.

THE LIGHTING SHOULD BE PINK AND INTIMATE UNTIL THE INSPECTOR ARRIVES AND THEN IT SHOULD BE BRIGHTER AND HARDER.
(ACT 1)

1. The use of the adverb 'dumbfounded' makes clear the traumatic revelatory nature of the Inspector's visit.
2. The use of the collective pronoun 'they' demonstrates the conclusive power of the play's end, the realisation and acceptance of all involved.
3. The reference to stagecraft draws a clear parallel between the didactic events of the Birling's dining room and the theatre itself, a space for the instruction of the post-war audience.

THEY ALL STARE GUILTY, DUMBFOUNDED, THE CURTAIN FALLS.
(ACT 3)



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley uses lighting in order to represent the psychological development of the Birling family. In this way he uses the stage and lighting to metaphorically represent the coming destruction of bourgeois capitalism and the revelation of its exploitative and dehumanising nature.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley's deliberate association of the Birling's final collective acceptance of truth with the dropping of the theatre curtain makes clear the parallel between cast and audience, both expected to realise the sins of capitalism and build a better socialist state in the future.

1. Sheila's use of the pronoun 'it' to describe the ring reflects the importance of it as a symbolic object for her, unable as she is to actually call it what it is.
2. The repeated use of dashes reflects her lack of rhetorical power and authority at this stage in the play.
3. Her questioning of whether it is the ring Gerald wanted for her reflects her dependency upon him.

SHEILA: (EXCITED) OH – GERALD – YOU'VE GOT IT – IS IT THE ONE YOU WANTED ME TO HAVE?
(ACT 1)

1. Sheila's use of the separating pronouns 'you' and 'I' reflects her new found independence.
2. Her declarative statement demonstrates her awareness of her own intellectual enlightenment, reflecting the development of the feminist and suffragette movements.
3. Sheila's tone is more measured and authoritative here reflecting her empowerment and independence.

SHEILA: YOU AND I AREN'T THE SAME PEOPLE WHO SAT DOWN TO DINNER HERE.
(ACT 3)



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley uses Sheila, at this stage of the play, as a tool to represent the intellectual suppression of the Edwardian, female middle-class. He demonstrates her dependence upon the institution of marriage, an institution which facilitated only the disempowerment of women.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley uses Sheila here as a metonym for the suffragette and feminist movements of the early twentieth-century. Her mode is more measured, intellectual, and analytical reflecting that of the Inspector. Priestley presents Sheila as an ideal figure, intellectually emancipated as the feminist movement of the time were.

1. The repetition of 'unsinkable' emphasises the hubristic nature of the bourgeoisie.
2. Priestley's use of dramatic irony emphasises the myopia and, in Marxist terms, false-consciousness of the Edwardian, bourgeoisie.
3. The adverb 'absolutely' reflects the blind self-confidence of Mr Birling.

MR BIRLING: UNSINKABLE, ABSOLUTELY UNSINKABLE.
(ACT 1)

1. Priestley's use of the language of criminality in 'confess' demonstrates that, in many ways, Capitalism is on trial here.
2. Birling's use of the adverb 'certainly' reflects his hubristic, patriarchal arrogance.
3. Again, Birling misuses the term 'duty' highlighting to Priestley's post-war audience the need to rethink duty from a socialist perspective.

MR BIRLING: HE CERTAINLY DIDN'T MAKE ME CONFESS – I HAD DONE NO MORE THAN MY DUTY.
(ACT 3)



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley intends here to use the sinking of the Titanic as a metaphor for many things; Society as a whole: the lower class occupying the lower decks without enough lifeboats to save them. Capitalism: which was about to suffer a heavy blow in the first World War. Birling himself: who will metaphorically sink in the estimation of the audience and finally Britain, whose Empire will begin to crumble under the social and political pressures of a post war Europe.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley uses Mr Birling here to highlight the unwillingness of the older, Capitalist class to endure the introspection necessary to admit responsibility; Priestley's use of the language of guilt and innocence further emphasises his use of the murder mystery genre to put capitalism on trial.

1. Use of the impersonal noun 'labour costs' demonstrates Birling's dehumanisation of the working class.
2. Birling's use of economic vocabulary shows that workers serve only profit for him.
3. His use of the word 'duty' is intended to be seen ironically by the audience, emphasising his absence of social responsibility.

MR BIRLING: IT'S MY DUTY TO KEEP LABOUR COSTS DOWN.
(ACT 1)

1. The use of the hyphens to identify the subordinate clause creates a fragmentary, wandering mode of speech that reflects Birling's disempowerment.
2. The repetition of 'thousands' highlights Birlings constant deferral to the power of capital to resolve problems and his inability to accept moral responsibility.
3. Birling's tone of desperation reveals the failure of capital and capitalism to address the structural inequalities of society.

MR BIRLING: I'D GIVE THOUSANDS – YES – THOUSANDS.
(ACT 3)



Author's Intentions:
Priestley uses Birling as a tool to critique capitalism, ironically pointing out that capitalism's only sense of duty is toward capital and money rather than individuals. Priestley thus shows how Edwardian capitalism subverts public morality.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley intends here to emphasise the character's futile and recurrent attempts to use money to solve problems. Birling's faltering mode demonstrates the futility of such methods, leading the audience to turn instead toward Priestley's more radical, structural offers of political change.

1. Sheila's pejorative appropriation of Mr Birling's economic language serves to critique capitalism's dehumanisation of the working-class.
2. Sheila's use of the collective pronoun 'people' demonstrates her empathy for the suffering and exploitation of workers and women.
3. The fronted conjunction mirrors the Inspector's radically disruptive mode of speech, revealing Sheila's internalising of socialist ideology.

SHEILA: BUT THESE GIRLS AREN'T CHEAP LABOUR - THEY'RE PEOPLE. (ACT 1)

1. Birling's exclamation of 'Rubbish' exemplifies his over-inflated, hubristic arrogance and belief in his own authority.
2. Birling's use of the demonstrative pronoun 'these' demonstrates his disdain for and othering of the working-class.
3. That the Inspector's criticism is implied rather than explicit hints at the seriousness of what is to be revealed to the Birlings.

BIRLING: RUBBISH! IF YOU DON'T COME DOWN SHARPLY ON SOME OF THESE PEOPLE, THEY'D SOON BE ASKING FOR THE EARTH. [...] INSPECTOR: THEY MIGHT. BUT AFTER ALL IT'S BETTER TO ASK FOR THE EARTH THAN TO TAKE IT (ACT 1)



Grade 9 Analysis:
Priestley uses Sheila's mocking of her father's discourse and ideology to articulate the conflicts between socialism and capitalism, and the older and younger generations. Sheila's declaration asserts the moral authority of socialist ideology which values empathy and connection over capital.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley's clear juxtaposition here of Birling's and Goole's modes of speech, one egoistic and self-confident and the other measured and analytical, is used as a tool to characterise the ideological conflict between Edwardian Capitalism and the dream of socialism that their argument represents.

1. The image of the wall is used to represent the process of distancing and othering that prevents Capitalists from empathising with the working-class.
2. Sheila's instructive warning serves to indicate her enlightenment and empathy with the plight of the proletariat.
3. Sheila's use of the demeaning noun phrase 'that girl' parodies the bourgeoisie's lack of empathy for the working-class.

SHEILA: YOU MUSTN'T TRY TO BUILD UP A KIND OF WALL BETWEEN US AND THAT GIRL. (ACT 2)

1. Mrs Birling's use of the relative pronoun 'that' emphasises her sense of superiority over the working-classes.
2. The collective noun 'girls' both infantilises and demeans the exploited women who work for the Birlings, reflecting the patronising perspective from which they look upon their workers.
3. The dismissive tone and resentment with which Eva and the working-classes generally are referred to exemplifies the authority of class identity and struggle in Marxist terms.

MRS BIRLING: GIRLS OF THAT CLASS. (ACT 3)



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley's metaphor of the wall that separates the classes signifies not only the intentional emotional detachment of the Capitalist classes but also exemplifies Marx's notion of eternal class struggle, reflecting the authority, above all, of class identity. This struggle can only be broken through revolution.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley uses Mrs Birling here to present a model of class relations within capitalist society. Sybil's demeaning self-distancing from Eva reflecting the authority of class difference and the character of 'eternal class struggle' as Marx defined it.

1. The repetition of the pronoun 'we' emphasises Socialism's desire to breakdown opposition between individuals in society.
2. The Inspector's simple, declarative sentence structures rhetorically highlight the importance of his speech.
3. The metaphorical comparison of 'body' and society reflects Priestley's belief that we all depend on the health and happiness of one another.

INSPECTOR: WE DON'T LIVE ALONE. WE ARE MEMBERS OF ONE BODY. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR EACH OTHER. (ACT 3)

1. Birling's dismissive tone in 'nonsense' associates him with the self-righteous arrogance of the Edwardian, bourgeoisie.
2. Birling parodies the moral authority of social responsibility, placing him in opposition to the Inspector.
3. The metaphorical comparison of 'society' to a hive of bees reflects Mr Birling's perjorative view of socialism.

MR BIRLING: ALL MIXED UP LIKE BEES IN A HIVE—COMMUNITY AND ALL THAT NONSENSE. (ACT 1)



Grade 9 Analysis:
The grammatical and declarative clarity of the Inspector's claims here serve to elevate the authority of his voice above the other characters; Priestley transforms him into an absolute moral authority and source of truth, reflecting his belief in the ethical superiority of socialism.



Grade 9 analysis:
Priestley uses Birling's voice here to implicitly convey his own perspective on the importance of 'community'; the metaphor of the hive, while used pejoratively by Birling, actually contains Priestley's own view of society as dependent upon co-operation and the sustaining of the health and happiness of all. In this way, Priestley uses Birling as rhetorical device to contain his own socialist views.

1. The use of complex sentence structure serves to create a tone of righteous anger in the Inspector's voice.
2. The pronoun 'you' stands here not just for the Birlings but also for Priestley's contemporary audience as well as the British capitalist, class of the post-war era.
3. The Inspector's use of biblical language in 'fire, blood, and anguish' further elevates his moral authority, directly associating capitalism and sinfulness.

INSPECTOR: AND I TELL YOU THAT THE TIME WILL SOON COME WHEN, IF MEN WILL NOT LEARN THAT LESSON, WHEN THEY WILL BE TAUGHT IT IN FIRE AND BLOOD AND ANGUISH. (ACT 3)



Grade 9 analysis:
Here Priestley imagines the Inspector as a higher moral authority, using biblical language and a righteous, moral tone to transform him into an almost prophet like figure. Priestley could be drawing a connection between Socialism and more Christian notions of morality. For post-war Britain, Socialism is the only source of redemption.